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LÁSZLÓ ORSZÁGH
THE FOUNDER OF AMERICAN STUDIES IN HUNGARY

László Országh was a prominent literary historian and linguist producing outstanding scholarly works in the fields of British and American Studies. As a holder of dual doctorates—according to the Hungarian academic nomenclature a Ph.D. of linguistics and an Academic Doctor of Western European and American Literature—he was the last representative of a legendary scholarly generation able to span an entire area of Hungarian and international disciplines.

In order to meet these almost impossible demands, Országh consciously prepared himself. His readings and reviews written at the dawn of his scholarly career demonstrate a wide scope of interest.¹ As a sophomore

¹ László Országh, "Ph. Aronstein: Das englische Renaissancedrama," *Egyetemes Philológiai Közlöny* LIII (1929): 135—136. — László Országh, "F. Bruns: Die amerikanische Dichtung der Gegenwart," *Egyetemes Philológiai Közlöny* LV (1931): 134. — László Országh, "L. L. Schücking: Die Familie im Puritanismus," *Egyetemes Philológiai Közlöny* LIII (1929): 226—227. — László Országh, "Szinnyei Ferenc: Novella- és regényirodalmunk az abszolutizmus korának elején," [= The Hungarian Short Story and Fiction in the Early Years of Absolutism.] *Egyetemes Philológiai Közlöny* LIII (1929): 205. — László Országh, "O. Walzel: Deutsche Dichtung von Gottsched bis zur Gegenwart," *Egyetemes Philológiai Közlöny* LIV (1930): 63—64. — László Országh, "Zolnai Béla: Körmondát és tiráda," [= Béla Zolnai: Period and Tirade.] *Egyetemes Philológiai Közlöny* LIII (1929): 206—207. — László Országh, "E. Rotfuchs: Der selbstbiographische Gehalt in Gustav Freytags Werken, bis 1885," *Egyetemes Philológiai*

college student, he recognized relatively early that a concentration and sole emphasis on the language, literature, and culture of Britain was insufficient and suggested the expansion of the scope of scholarly research to the culture of the United States as well. Therefore, he decided to complete his studies and begin research in the United States. Although his 1930 application startled many of his fellow class members and teachers, he was able to enroll at Rollins College in Florida during the 1930—1931 school year, thanks to a scholarship from the New York Institute of International Education. He studied American literature and literary history in a seminar under professor F. L. Pattee and gathered material in numerous public libraries and in the Library of Congress as well. The results of his research were summed up in his 1931—1932 doctoral dissertation, *The Development of American Literary Historiography*.² In 1935, in addition to passing his doctoral examinations, he was the first to publish in Hungary a work analysing the evolution of the theory of literature in the United States.

The Development of American Literary Historiography is the first publication of Országh's prolific and extensive career as an American Studies scholar. His efforts are all the more remarkable as he explored a topic rarely researched by American experts until then. His dissertation retraces the evolution of American literary history from its separation from

Közlöny LIV (1930): 63. — László Országh, "R. C. Traveyan: Thamyris, or is there a future for poetry?," *Egyetemes Philológiai Közlöny* LIV (1930): 53—55. — László Országh, "K. Schwedtke und R. Salewsky: Die bildende Kunst im neusprachlichen Unterricht," *Egyetemes Philológiai Közlöny* LIII (1929): 221—222. — László Országh, "Bogyai Tamás: A művész a korai középkorban," [= Tamás Bogyai: The Artist in the Early Middle Ages.] *Egyetemes Philológiai Közlöny* LVII (1933): 82. — László Országh, "Farkas Gyula: Romános—Romántos—Romantikus," *Egyetemes Philológiai Közlöny* LIV (1930): 44. — László Országh, "Angol könyvek az iskolai irodalomoktatásról," [= English Books on Teaching Literature in Schools.] *Egyetemes Philológiai Közlöny* LVI (1932): 239—242. — László Országh, "H. M. Hain: My Visit to England," *Egyetemes Philológiai Közlöny* LVII (1933): 81. — László Országh, "Vatter Ilona: A soproni német színészek története 1841-ig," [= Ilona Vatter: The History of German Acting in Sopron until 1841.] *Egyetemes Philológiai Közlöny* LIV (1930): 45—46.

² László Országh, *Az amerikai irodalomtörténetírás fejlődése*, [= The Development of American Literary Historiography.] (Budapest: A Királyi magyar Pázmány Péter Tudományegyetem Angol Philológiai Intézetének kiadványai, 1935) 60 pp.

British roots to its development of a national perspective and its establishment of intellectual autonomy. Országh continued to devote his attention to the development of an independent American national literature when he returned to the topic of his doctoral dissertation in his thorough and analytical 1958 essay, *The Preponderance of National Perspective in American Literary Historiography and Criticism*.³

His lucid yet substantial studies, introductions, author portrayals and comprehensive essays reflected scholarly research and indicated his preparation for the writing of an extensive, wideranging work on the history of American literature. In his first significant study,⁴ he analyzed Sinclair Lewis'—America's first Nobel laureate—criticism of middle class life at the time of the American Industrial Revolution, the unrestrained greed and other definitive values of the era, and the author's moderate irony and realistic, disillusioned description of everyday life. In the descriptive and analytical introductory chapter to *American Literature in the Twentieth Century*, Országh provides a sweeping historic and cultural panorama including an overarching view of the history of literature and the press, gives stringently logical analyses of extremely heterogeneous literary phenomena, adroitly sketches the main developmental trends of American literature, and presents the significant authors and literary achievements of the era.⁵ The same volume includes Országh's artistically imaginative, profound, and empathic essay on one of his favorite authors, John Steinbeck.⁶ In his Whitman treatise, he analyzes the human and artistic significance of this revolutionarily modern poet who in "free falling lines of free verse sang hitherto unheard songs of the new times to honor the

³ László Országh, "A nemzeti szempont uralomra jutása az amerikai irodalomtörténetírásban és kritikában," [= The Preponderance of National Perspective in American Literary Historiography and Criticism.] *Világirodalmi Figyelő* 1 (1958): 10—21.

⁴ László Országh, "Sinclair Lewis," *Magyar Kultúra* 13—14 (1934): 7—12.

⁵ László Országh, "Bevezetés a huszadik század amerikai irodalmába," [= An Introduction to American Literature in the Twentieth Century.] *Az amerikai irodalom a XX. században*, ed. László Kardos and Mihály Sükösd (Budapest: Gondolat Könyvkiadó, 1962) 5—44.

⁶ László Országh, "John Steinbeck," *Az amerikai irodalom a XX. században*, ed. László Kardos and Mihály Sükösd (Budapest: Gondolat Könyvkiadó, 1962) 359—377.

heroes of American democracy: the laborer, the farmer, the negro, and the Indian; expounded the ideals and intellectual desires of the nation and wrote about physical love. In his poetry Whitman soared to become a prophet to lead his nation to the ideal of true democracy, to the promise land of liberty, equality and fraternity by demonstrating the strength and future greatness of his vast country".⁷ In *The American Drama in the Twentieth Century*, Országh retraces the development of the genre and introduces the most significant playwrights.⁸

Not only did the 1967 publication of *The History of American Literature*⁹—a synthesis of Országh's scholarly efforts—fill a great void but it remains the first and only Hungarian language comprehensive survey of the three and a half century history of American literature. The author in his vivid and enjoyable style describes the main periods of American history, highlights the social and economic background of the nation's cultural and literary development, and provides an aesthetically refined introduction to the notable writers and their achievements. While in its form Országh's book is a work devoted to the popularization of science—thereby serving an informative purpose—the author's vast knowledge, scholarly preparedness, lucid, logical arrangement of data, reliable informational background, comprehensive bibliography, and the authentic portrayal of writers and social, cultural, and historic trends make it a significant scholarly achievement. Országh's work is an indispensable reference book for researchers, university teachers, college students, and the general public alike. "*The History of American Literature* stimulates readers' interest and inspires researchers not only by its subject's novelty in Hungary, but by the author's culturally and historically founded lucid and balanced descriptions

⁷ László Országh, afterword, *Leaves of Grass*, by Walt Whitman (Budapest: Magyar Helikon, 1964) 711—722.

⁸ László Országh, "Az amerikai dráma a huszadik században," [= *The American Drama in the Twentieth Century*.] *Nagyvilág* 7 (1966): 1069—1076.

⁹ László Országh, *Az amerikai irodalom története* [= *The History of American Literature*.] (Budapest: Gondolat Könyvkiadó, 1967) 433 pp.

of the literary events and the concise logic of his treatment of the topic as well.”¹⁰

The complementary volume to the *The History of American Literature*, titled *An Introduction to American Studies*,¹¹ is a “philological first-aid”¹² to college students, university teachers, and researchers interested in this increasingly popular discipline. Having outlined his objective and defined the scope of American Studies, Országh devoted separate chapters to American history, literature, elements of American civilization (including education, library science, cultural foundations, entertainment and public-opinion shaping factors, fine arts, music, philosophy, and religion), American English, and folklore. The two longest chapters of the *Introduction* deal with the literature of the United States and the question of American English. The book concentrates on bibliographic data providing comprehensively instructive and abundant yet critically selective information complemented by written text. While the bibliographies contain mostly works written in English, where needed the author includes the most important German, French, Italian, and Russian achievements along with the notable efforts of Hungarian scholars as well. “László Országh’s *Introduction* is not only an important and welcome scholarly reference book but one of the landmarks in the history of American Studies in Hungary contributing to more systematic, profound, and thorough study of this discipline.”¹³

The History of American Literature and *An Introduction to American Studies* are significant contributions to a program announced by Országh in 1965 in the *Hungarian Studies in English*. In his pamphlet-like study, *A*

¹⁰ Péter Egri, “Országh László irodalomtörténeti munkásságáról,” [= On László Országh’s Life-work in the History of Literature.] *Filológiai Tanulmányok* 2—3 (1984): 314.

¹¹ László Országh, *Bevezetés az amerikanisztikába* [= An Introduction to American Studies.] (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1972) 192 pp.

¹² Péter Egri, “Országh László irodalomtörténeti munkásságáról,” [= On László Országh’s Life-work in the History of Literature.] *Filológiai Tanulmányok* 2—3 (1984): 315. — Péter Egri, “Országh László 1907—1984,” *Irodalomtörténet* 3 (1984): 793.

¹³ László Kéry, rev. of *Bevezetés az amerikanisztikába*, [= An Introduction to American Studies.] by László Országh, *Magyar Tudomány* 7—8 (1973): 549.

*Program for American Studies in Hungary*¹⁴, he pointed out the historic tradition of official neglect as one of the main obstacles to the establishment and research of the discipline. He considered the mid-century, stereotypical, traditional America-image and the widespread ignorance concerning the cultural achievements of the United States “ostrich-like behavior” and an “impermissible luxury.” He argued that “the intellectual achievement of the United States became so versatile and significant in the twentieth century, and America’s intellectual role is so dominant in the Western World that a refusal to research this field could adversely affect our intellectual orientation.” In order to facilitate the establishment and development of American Studies and to promote research, Országh outlined the most important tasks:

1. The publication of a multi-volume abundantly detailed Hungarian language work aimed to address domestic superficiality and ignorance concerning the United States through an analysis of its historical development, political structure, economy, and society with additional emphasis on the people, language, literature, arts, and science.
2. The publication of a scholarly analysis on the history of American literature.
3. The compilation and publication of a bibliography of primary and secondary sources concerning American literature and literary criticism in Hungary.
4. A scholarly examination of Hungarian—American cultural relations with special attention to the Hungarian reception of American literature.
5. Research on Hungarian influence on American civilization.
6. The creation of an organizational framework, providing adequate financial resources and maintaining a supply line of future re-

¹⁴ László Országh, “Az amerikanisztika feladatai Magyarországon,” [= A Program for American Studies in Hungary.] *Angol Filológiai Tanulmányok* II (1965): 121—126. — László Országh, “A Programme for American Studies in Hungary,” *The New Hungarian Quarterly* 23 (1966): 163—167.

searchers, in order to assure the success of American Studies in Hungary.

7. The establishment of American Studies departments in Hungary as soon as possible.¹⁵
8. The launching of scholarship-financed research and the organization of teacher exchange programs.
9. The establishment of a reference library to promote university level teaching and research.

Not only did László Országh establish this new discipline, but he also inaugurated a new field of academic inquiry. In addition to laying out a program he turned many elements of his recommendations to reality, and the development of American Studies in Hungary depends on his intellectual and professional guidance to this day.

Országh devoted a significant portion of his scholarly activities to the analysis of Hungarian—English and Hungarian—American cultural relations.¹⁶ His exemplary microphilological essay, *Misztótfalusi Kis and the First Hungarian Book about America*,¹⁷ presents a thorough scholarly analysis of Increase Mather's *De Successu Evangelii apud Indos in Nova Anglia, Epistola ad cl. virum D. Johannem Leusdenum, Linguae Sanctae in Ultrajectina Academia Professore, scripta a Crescentio Mathero, apud Bostonienses V. D. M. nec non Collegii Harvardini quod est Cantabrigiae*

¹⁵ I can still hear his testament-like words uttered to me during our last meeting in December 1983: "My son, do not stop the compilation of the bibliography of American literature, and when the time comes establish independent departments of American Studies." The establishment of a separate department of American Studies was always in his mind and he even thought of it when he was mortally ill. His disciples fulfilled his wish and the first department of American Studies was established on January 1, 1990, soon to be followed by departments in Debrecen and Budapest.

¹⁶ Lehel Vadon, *Országh László* (Eger: Eszterházy Károly Tanárképző Főiskola nyomdája, 1994) 37—41.

¹⁷ László Országh, "Misztótfalusi Kis és az első magyar könyv Amerikáról," [= Mistótfalusi Kis and the First Hungarian Book about America.] *Magyar Könyvszemle* 1 (1958): 22—41. — László Országh, "A Seventeenth-Century Hungarian Translation of a Work by Increase Mather," *American Literature* 34 (1962): 94—96.

Nov-Anglorum Rectore, 1688. It is the first Hungarian publication solely devoted to America and the first Hungarian translation of an American author's work. Országh fully reconstructed the seriously damaged title page of Mather's work whose sole surviving Hungarian version provided abundant information about the author, the book's content and other valuable bibliographical data. This work is kept at the Calvinist College in Debrecen. Országh provided a letter-perfect rendition of Mather's letter, and the short preface on the back of the title page written by the Hungarian translator to inform the public about the historic background of the colonization and conversion process. His evidence showing how he proved the identity of the translator is reasonable and scientifically sound.

In his study *Literature in the Foxhole. What the American Soldiers Read*, Országh reviewed the type of books disseminated among American soldiers during World War II and demonstrated the author's interest in the sociological aspects of literature.

Országh's outstanding character and vast knowledge virtually predestined him for a life of a scholar-teacher where teaching, learning, and research always complemented each other. Following his 1947 appointment to head the Department of English at Kossuth University in Debrecen—a short politically compelled interruption notwithstanding—he served in that capacity until his retirement in 1968. During his tenure, he not only reorganized but consciously built the department. In an age when even British-oriented subjects were treated with suspicion, Országh's challenge of contemporary political constraints broke new scholarly ground by introducing courses in American Studies, primarily with a literary focus. In order to promote the success of American Studies in Debrecen he acquired numerous literary classics and reference books for the departmental library. In addition to writing textbooks and compiling readers¹⁸ he established a scholarly periodical, *Hungarian Studies in English*. He edited this publication for the next ten years with the express purpose of promoting the

¹⁸ László Országh, ed., *An American Reader* (Budapest: Felsőoktatási Jegyzetellátó Vállalat, 1960) 452 pp. — László Országh, ed., *Second American Reader* (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1963) 394 pp. — László Országh, *A Sketch of the History of American Literature* (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1968) 124 pp.

publication of the results of English and American Studies research in Hungary.

He consciously guided several of his young, talented, and devoted students towards the field of British and American Studies in addition to directing numerous senior theses and doctoral dissertations. He established a successful working relationship with English and American universities and research institutions enabling his colleagues to participate in study trips and conferences abroad. He was instrumental in the establishment of a scholarship at Indiana University, Bloomington, where young Debrecen graduates worked for decades teaching Hungarian language and literature while performing scholarly research.

László Országh, the Father of American Studies in Hungary, made the Department of English at Kossuth University a well-known institution, not only at home but beyond our borders as well. His personal and intellectual heritage is a guiding principle for his colleagues and students to follow.